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ABSTRACT

To analyze how schools place students into special education, 66 case discussions were transcribed and assessment team members interviewed. Ways in which team participants weigh statements were examined through a taxonomy of their perceptions of learning disabilities and a match of the meeting discussions to subsequent placement decisions in light of these perceptions. Transcriptions were coded for context (e.g., test scores, classroom behavior) and for form (e.g., reiteration, rephrasing, examples). Utterances were then correlated to statements selected for inclusion in the student's folder, the individual pupil assessment (IPA), and factors cited in interviews leading to group consensus over placement. Participants were asked what they attended to in the meetings. There was no correlation between speaker and inclusion of statements into the IPA nor between speaker and adoption of placement recommendations. Findings also suggested that members' extended examples prefacing a statement seemed to equalize access of the participants in discussion. It was also found that goals are formed only after placement decisions are agreed upon. The taxonomy illustrated the commonality of perceptions across professional training. (CL)

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TEAM AGREEMENT

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Abstract: **TEAM AGREEMENT**

This is a study of the process of communication at assessment team meetings in order to analyze how schools place students into special education. The project contains transcripts of 66 case discussions or meetings plus follow-up interviews with the members of five teams. The study displays how the team participants weigh statements by drawing a taxonomy of their perceptions of learning disabilities, and then matching the discussion at meetings to subsequent placement decisions in light of these perceptions.

The investigator transcribed each meeting, marking speaker, statement and form of evidence used to elaborate upon the statement. This evidence was coded both for content (ex: test scores, classroom behavior) and for form (ex: reiteration, rephrasing, example). These utterances were then correlated to both the statements selected for inclusion in the student's folder, the individual pupil assessment (IPA), and as factors cited in interviews leading to group consensus over placement. The researcher further probed the team participants to relate what they attended to in the meetings. In this manner, the significance and relationships of statements could be classified into a taxonomy.

The study revealed some surprising findings. The first concerned role and status of the speaker. There was no correlation found between speaker and the inclusion of statements into the IPA; there was also no correlation between speaker and adoption of placement recommendation. These challenge current assumptions about authority of speaker in teams, for no one team member was dominant in terms of having a controlling voice in placement, even though the number of his or her statements may be greater. Every member clarified remarks and exemplified points. The only member who was rarely questioned was the speech pathologist.

The second finding, the forms used to elaborate statements, revealed several insights into group interaction. Extended examples prefacing a statement seemed to equalize access of the participants in the discussion. In other words, members who felt their statements might not be accepted because of a perceived lower status could gain authority by having members accept the extended example as similar to their own experiences with the student. Some parents tended to rely upon reiteration in order to emphasize their concerns or to challenge an opinion. The teams who did not rephrase the parents' reiterations, who merely acknowledged them, were the teams who generated the most frustration for the parents and who, in turn, felt themselves frustrated.

The folk taxonomy was necessary to bridge the difference in language used in utterances and the language written into the IPA. Once statements were found to correspond, the omission of some statements was curious. The third group of findings centered upon assumptions about learning disabilities that are part of the implicit knowledge shared by the team and were discerned by the inclusion of statements written into the official record. Participants were questioned for reasons behind

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exclusion from IPA of statements on suicide, and inclusion in IPA on cultural background. These recording gaps unveiled assumptions held by members despite differences in professional training.

The fourth finding, order of topics, demonstrate that goals are formed only after placement decisions are agreed upon.

The results of this study suggest that concerns actually taken into account and the means feasible within the school system are expressed within the meetings. Thus, the discussion provides valuable data. The taxonomy illustrated the commonality of perceptions that cuts across professional training to show how we, as a culture, construe learning disabilities and how we organize ourselves institutionally to address them. Most basic to the existence of a learning disability were statements describing a student's orientation to school as basis of reward or to objects as basis of reward. These were evidenced for the team by behavior and interpretation of attitude; they were documented for state by testing.

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TEAM AGREEMENT

Introduction

This study uses a folk taxonomy and discourse analysis in order to discover how students are placed in special education through assessment meetings. The researcher transcribed 66 case discussions, and interviewed the team members, eliciting remarks that were organized into a taxonomy. This taxonomy served as a guide to understand how statements made in the meetings are perceived and weighed in the team decisions.

Since the concerns actually taken into account in a placement decision are voiced within the meetings, what is discussed yields vital data. Observations, the interpretations and the significance of these observations, are actively negotiated by team members having various professional backgrounds: (psychology, guidance, nursing, social work, education, special education). How topics are introduced and how opinions are evidenced are important to the weight given to them in decisions, and are also subject to analysis by the rules for conversational analysis, small group interaction, and cognitive constructs from folk taxonomies of learning disabilities.

The guiding questions of the research project are as follows:

1. What are the topics of discussion in an assessment, review, and dismissal (ARD) meeting?
2. What statements within these topics become included in the IPA (individual program assessment)?
3. What statements correlate with placement decisions?
4. How are these statements stated and evidenced?
5. Why do participants feel they agree?
6. What do the participants attend to in making their decisions?

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Design and Procedure

The design of this study is to utilize the remarks made within the ARD meeting to draw out the team members' individual perceptions of what leads to their recommendations.

The researcher transcribed the meetings in shorthand, and also preserved the record composed by the team and entered into the individual pupil assessment (IPA). Following each meeting, the investigator probed team members to react to the statements of each topic brought up in the meeting and to explain why some statements were included in the IPA and not others. Further, the researcher sought the reason each had for the placement decision. The reasons given in these interviews were correlated with statements from the meeting. Thus, the statements in each topic discussed in the meeting were designated as significant for inclusion in the IPA and for consideration in the placement recommendation.

The investigator also conducted interviews in which each team member related what he or she listened for within the meeting. The topics were thus grouped into categories by the team and the significance of statements were interpreted for the interviewer. A taxonomy of categories was thus elicited. Tables with statements listed by topic (Appendix A) and grouped under categories (Appendix B) were constructed. The speaker was identified for each utterance. The type of utterance was also marked as statement, clarification, example, reiteration, and question. Inclusion in IPA and factor in placement decision was noted for each statement. A sample table can be found in Appendix C. These nine categories for statements made within the meeting suggested to the team two contingency-orientations: orientation to school as reward, and orientation to material

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objects as reward. The frequency and duration of behaviors indicative of one of the two basic orientations was cited as crucial for placement.

Results and Discussion

By designating the speaker on the discussion tables, the researcher was able to test if one speaker dominated the discussion by both number of statements and by the effect of these statements. There was no correlation found between speaker and statements corresponding with inclusion in IPA or with factor of agreement. This finding is highly significant in the light of a common assumption about the authority of team members. It is generally held that the status of the psychologist is perceived as higher by other team members. This perception did not affect the weight the team gave to statements made by the psychologists in this study.

Another finding of this study concerned with status and role of the team members was that the only team participant whose statements rarely brought requests for clarification was the speech pathologist. When questioned about this trend, the speech pathologists responded that they had felt their opinion was not accorded sufficient value in the past, and interpreted the lack of inquiry as an indication that this was the case. The other team members responded by explaining that since the speech pathologists travel among the schools in the district, and often do not remain working with the team for more than a year, the team members take the input of the speech pathologists at face value.

Because every meeting opened with a report of test results, the investigator expected to find test scores as a determining factor in placement decisions. What was found was that the psychologist, followed by the learning diagnostician were the two members most involved in testing and in interpreting the testing. However, grade level, psycho-

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logical evaluation, and testing behavior were pitted against the projected capacity of the student and it was the gap between these two which proved significant factors in placement. Furthermore, the capacity of the student was inferred in an equal amount of statements generated by all members: no one member dominated. The capacity was inferred by classroom academic performance but not by grades attained in the classroom. In fact, grades were overruled by both diagnostic testing and projected capacity. In other words, strengths and weaknesses were determined by attempts to perform rather than net result, grades.

What accounted for the gap was either poor motivation and counter-productive behavior, or it was a physical or emotional disability. Physical factors were ruled upon by diagnostic testing. Emotional factors were evidenced by inappropriate behaviors and documented by the psychological evaluation. Thus, attention span, self-concept, impulsivity, and general classroom behavior were used in evidence for emotional factors that affect academic performance.

The anecdotal accounts and the extended recounting of dialogues performed two functions in the meetings. First, they served to exemplify behavior and attitude. In this way, the members judged the statement upon capacity and motivation by how true the behavioral example was if it was in accordance with their experience with the student. The second function these extended examples appeared to serve was as an admission to equal status with other group members for the speaker. Every speaker used examples. The resource teacher and the mainstream teacher tended to be the ones who employed extended examples; they were also the ones who perceived either their own status as lower than other team participants, or their statements as not carrying equal weight in team consensus.

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One additional finding in style of speaking is that the parents who expressed the most frustration in their dealings with the ARD process were parents who relied heavily upon reiteration in order to clarify their concerns or to challenge the team's opinion. Team participants often mitigated this frustration by rephrasing parental concerns and then giving concrete examples of what the student does in the classroom. Reiteration by the parents, when responded to by a simple acknowledgement, often marked a close to the negotiation process of the meeting and marked the beginning of withdrawal by the parent.

Learning strategies were stated in overwhelmingly negative terms; teaching strategies were proposed to meet negative lapses by the student. Goals and teaching strategies were almost never proposed to capitalize upon a student's strength. Another tendency was that goals were composed after the placement decision was made.

Finally, some surprising assumptions were uncovered as the investigator matched discussion statements to IPA inclusion and group consensus. In the meeting on one case, the reason for poor reading comprehension was explained as due to cultural background. The background, as clarified in the follow-up interview was "deprived...poor...lacking in experiences." This assumption equated the student's home experiences with the ability to understand concepts, not with familiarity vocabulary. It was group shared implicit knowledge. In a second case, three members related experiences with a student who talked of committing suicide by slashing his arm. One member recounted the time the student rolled up his sleeve and poised a pair of scissors above the inner part of his elbow. The team recommended a psychological evaluation, but for the inability to initiate a show of emotion; the student responded to the emotion of others near him. Suicide

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was dismissed, the team related, because the student was too young. He was 8 1/2 years old. In their words, "suicide is frustration--anger turned in. They usually don't show anger until they are older." This belief, also, is group knowledge. It became apparent by matching discussion statements and IPA exclusion.

This study concluded that there are implicit, commonly held criterion used in placing students. The use of examples and requests for clarification indicate an active negotiation process in which statements are elaborated until they correspond to these criterion. Although diagnostic terms varied according to professional training, the two basic contingency orientations that they referred to were constant. Statements made within the meeting were translated into wording appropriate for the audience of the IPA, the state. Even though this translation carried its own rules for acceptable language, the statements selected for inclusion and translation were based upon correspondences to the nine topic categories, and in turn, the two contingency-orientations. The cognitive construct of a learning disability cuts across areas of professional training to reveal what we, as members of a culture, recognize and designate as signs. Special education, after team agreement, is how we institutionally organize ourselves to meet these signs of contingency-orientation.

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APPENDIX A

Test Scores

Test Behavior

Diagnostic Tests

Grades

Organization Skills

Attention Span

Attitude

Impulsivity

Classroom Behavior

Social (peer) Behavior

Placement Recommendation

Procedure (school rules)

Family Interaction

Student History (physical, retention, prior performance)

Family History

Ability

Teaching Strategy

Learning Strategy

Student Interest

Homework

Prior Placement

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APPENDIX B

1. Academic Orientation by Performance
2. School Orientation by Behavior
3. Attitude and Motivation
4. Teaching Strategy
5. Procedure
6. Placement
7. Family
8. Student History
9. Testing

APPENDIX C

TOPIC:

Teaching/Learning Strategy

	EXTERNAL				INTERNAL			SPEAKING					IPA
	grades	test	performance	homework	process	attitude	motivation	capacity	Learning Str. Teaching Str. Goal	statements	clarifications	reiteration	example	questions	INTERVIEW
I think you might have some problems [need] smaller groups self-paced															
I think you need to shore up those skills. [with special assistance]															
some courses need reading social studies..use of texts															
Are there different expectations?															
They must pass Maryland Functional Test															
if not moved into reading resource.															